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Growing pains on Shore

Prized way of life at a crossroads, report says

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Maryland's Eastern Shore could lose nearly 100,000 acres of farms and forest - an area twice the size of Baltimore - unless its counties and towns do a better job controlling growth, the state planning agency says in a new report.

Taking its first look at the impact of development on the rural peninsula, the Maryland Department of Planning warns that the Eastern Shore can expect 160,000 new residents during the next 25 years - a nearly 40 percent increase. The region is overtaking Southern Maryland as the fastest-growing part of the state.

"We're not talking about a doomsday forecast for the Shore," said Richard E. Hall, who heads the Planning Department.

"But we think it's important for people to understand what's at stake here, the long-term consequences."

The report, prepared over six months, looks at how local governments on the Eastern Shore have managed growth. Then it forecasts the impact of development if current practices continue.

Among the findings:

- Even towns and counties that maintain comprehensive growth plans often do not follow them. More than 40 percent of residential development on the Shore between 1990 and 2005 was built outside designated growth areas.
- As such development has spread, the region has lost nearly 45,000 acres of farmland and 71,000 acres of forest during the past three decades.
- If governments use Smart Growth principles to guide future development, the Shore could limit further loss of farmland and forest to about 24,000 acres by 2030. But if current practices continue, the region will



lose about 96,000 acres.

The Eastern Shore is "at a crossroads between a future that can hold much promise ... or one that may lead to a permanent degradation of a place and a way of life that residents now treasure," the report says.

The Shore's nine counties and 56 towns already are experiencing exponential growth, and planners are encouraging local governments and counties to base decisions on Smart Growth principles. Those include concentrating growth around existing development and protecting farms and forests with restrictive zoning and programs that pay farmers and others to retain open land.

While town and county officials often say they support Smart Growth, state officials and environmentalists point out that local development decisions frequently run counter to those principles.

And local officials in Maryland have steadfastly fought against proposals over the years to give the state more control over growth decisions.

"We're happy to get some guidance from the state, but we're working on this. And I like the idea that we have local control," said Eric S. Wargotz, a commissioner in [Queen Anne's County](#), where places such as Kent Island and Centreville have seen substantial new development in recent years.

In a decision upsetting to environmentalists, the state's highest court ruled this month that Maryland law does not require local governments to stick to their master plans or state growth-management policies in making development decisions. The opinion came as the Court of Appeals upheld [Allegany County's](#) approval of a 4,300-home development in a rural area of mountainous Western Maryland.

"The last thing local governments need is an intrusionist policy from the state," said David Bliden, executive director of the Maryland Association of Counties. "It is in the public interest to maintain land use at the local level, where there is accountability."

With the Eastern Shore's population likely headed to nearly 600,000 by the year 2030, state officials say long-range planning is crucial to maintaining the region's landscape and traditional seafood and agriculture industries. Queen Anne's County, along with Cecil and Caroline counties, might have more demand for new housing than land designated to handle it, according to the report.

The good news, according to the report, is that a variety of preservation programs, public and private, have set aside a total of 466,000 acres on the Shore through easements, 22 percent of the region's 2.1 million acres. Developed land still accounts for only about 9 percent of the total.

"I'm excited to see the state taking on this kind of analysis on a regional basis," said Rob Etgen, who heads the nonprofit Eastern Shore Land Conservancy, which has preserved 40,000 acres of open space. "I'm excited to see the state showing leadership."

The report includes recommendations for local governments - everything from updating comprehensive plans (which are required to be filed with the state planning office by October 2009) to creating growth areas with minimum density of 3.5 housing units per acre and conservation areas restricted to one house per 20 acres.

But state officials have little or no regulatory authority.

On the Shore, state and [Wicomico County](#) officials have criticized a 1,700-unit development that is under consideration in the small town of Hebron, near [Salisbury](#). A town with a population of about 1,000, Hebron could have seven times that many residents in 25 years.

But John Holston Jr., who heads Hebron's planning and zoning commission, contends that the proposal adopts many of the key goals of Smart Growth. The development would be built on public water and sewer systems, he notes, unlike many sprawling Shore developments.

But critics say the development would dwarf the existing town.

"It's out of proportion with the rest of the community," Hall said. "The basic issue has been and remains the size and magnitude of this project."

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